

# First records of Long-legged Pipit *Anthus pallidiventris* for Nigeria and Benin

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**Premières mentions du Pipit à long bec *Anthus pallidiventris* pour le Nigeria et le Bénin.** Deux Pipits à long bec *Anthus pallidiventris* ont été vus et filmés à Ibadan, dans le sud-ouest du Nigeria, le 15 novembre 2002. Un groupe de deux autres oiseaux a été photographié à Grand Popo, dans le sud-ouest du Bénin, le 8 août 2004. Ces deux observations constituent les premières mentions documentées pour le Nigeria et le Bénin et se situent respectivement à environ 600 km et 790 km de l'aire de répartition connue de l'espèce. Elles pourraient indiquer une méconnaissance de la répartition du Pipit à long bec dans cette partie de l'Afrique de l'Ouest ou bien étayer l'hypothèse d'une extension de son aire de répartition.

## Nigeria

On 15 November 2002, SW was exploring the grounds of the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture on the outskirts of Ibadan, Oyo State, south-west Nigeria (07°29'43"N 03°53'55"E), when he saw a large pipit in the agricultural area beside the lake. The previous day he had noted Plain-backed Pipit *Anthus leucophrys zenkeri* in the same area, but this bird was of strikingly different appearance, more 'lanky' and with paler underparts. Being unfamiliar with racial variation in Plain-backed Pipit, a different race of this species was considered as the first possibility and some time was taken to study the bird(s) and obtain video footage using a digital camcorder through a telescope at a range of c.50 m (Fig. 1). On detailed examination of the video it was apparent that there had been two similar birds present in the same area, perhaps a pair. Throughout the original observation the birds fed methodically in short dry grass, near the rice paddies on the east side of the lake. At least four Plain-backed Pipits were seen nearby and closely studied, these being of rather variable appearance but all were apparently of the race *zenkeri* (Fig. 2).

Overall, the plumage of both of the larger birds was rather plain, with a very uniform pale brown back, without the clearly contrasting greater coverts and secondaries of the nearby Plain-backed Pipits. Also, the underparts were noticeably pale, lacking the buff flanks exhibited by the paler of the *zenkeri*, and the breast spotting was also fainter. The eyestripe was very noticeable, being prominent in front of the eye. The malar and moustachial stripes appeared quite similar to those of the Plain-backed Pipits, i.e. the former quite marked and the latter rather indistinct.

The birds in question also had a rather different structure, being apparently less stocky and more 'elongated'. Careful comparison of photographs revealed the neck to be distinctly longer and narrower, the head more angular with a flatter crown, the bill noticeably longer (though similarly bright orange-yellow on the mandible in both species, slightly darker at the tip and more brown on the maxilla) and the dark brown irides less prominent, i.e. smaller in comparison to the head. The legs also appeared distinctly longer, especially the tibia, and were slightly more yellowish on the tarsus. In the normal upright stance, the fore-belly was clearly deeper, giving the impression of a more tapering rear. Vertical wagging of the entire rear end of the bird was frequent, invariably on alighting, and even more marked than observed in the Plain-backed Pipits. The feeding action was mainly a deliberate stepping through the grass and stooping to take presumed insect prey from the ground, reminiscent of a plover taking food on the shore, with the bill normally held open. The call was easily distinguished from that of the Plain-backed Pipits, being a more 'vigorous' *tzzirp*, interspersed by a high-pitched *zip - zip - zip*, the latter reminiscent of calls or initial part of the song of Meadow Pipit *Anthus pratensis*, and suspected to be (part of) the bird's song.

An issue requiring consideration in the identification process is the apparent variability of some plumage features displayed by the local Plain-backed Pipits. Amongst four nearby birds, two exhibited rather dusky underparts with a rich buff colour across the entire belly, whilst the other two were much paler. These latter were considered at the time to be possibly of the race *gouldii*, whose range mainly encompasses





**Figure 1.** (left) Long-legged Pipit / Pipit à long bec *Anthus pallidiventris*, Ibadan, Nigeria, 15 November 2002 (Stephen Welch)

**Figure 2.** (right) Plain-backed Pipit / Pipit à dos uni *Anthus leucophrys*, Ibadan, Nigeria, 15 November 2002 (Stephen Welch)



**Figures 3–5.** Long-legged Pipit / Pipit à long bec *Anthus pallidiventris*, Grand Popo, Benin, 8 August 2004 (Marc Thibault)

**Figure 6.** Plain-backed Pipit / Pipit à dos uni *Anthus leucophrys*, Avlékété village, Benin, 11 August 2004 (Marc Thibault)

Sierra Leone, Liberia and Ivory Coast (Borrow & Demey 2001), but this was subsequently excluded, it being felt that variation in soil colour, or rainfall (specifically paler birds being more associated with the moist soils of south-west Nigeria), moult state, or individual variation within *zenkeri* were more likely explanations (N. Borrow & R. J. Dowsett *in litt.* 2011). Irrespective of their variable plumage, all of the Plain-backed Pipits were easily distinguishable structurally from the other two birds.

On returning from Nigeria, images and video of all of the birds was posted online (<http://sedgewarbler.blogspot.com/2009/07/plain-backed-pipits-and-long-legged.html>). N. Borrow provided many helpful comments on the variability of the Plain-backed Pipits and suggested that the other birds were Long-legged Pipits *Anthus pallidiventris*, with the same suggestion being received independently from I. Sinclair.

## Benin

On 8 August 2004, PDR & MT were birding the outskirts of the seaside village of Grand Popo, western Benin (06°16'40"N 01°48'47"E), when they saw two large pipits. Plain-backed Pipit *A. l. zenkeri* was the only large *Anthus* the observers were expecting to encounter in this area—especially in summer—but the two birds immediately appeared noticeably larger and paler, and lacked the distinctive warm buff or cinnamon tone to the underparts of the latter species (Fig. 6). Fortunately, the birds were tame and permitted observation and digiscoping (Figs. 3–5) to 20 m over *c.*15 minutes, before they flew west and out of sight. During this time, the birds foraged in a small field of short grass as well as on a bare sandy track just a few hundred metres inland of the Grand Popo beach. Mostly, they stayed close together and were perhaps a pair.



The general impression was of two large plain *Anthus*, somewhat reminiscent of Richard's Pipit *A. richardi* in size and plumage. Underparts were very pale, mainly creamy white, with pale buff restricted to the breast-sides and flanks. Dark streaking was well marked on the breast. The head pattern included a prominent whitish supercilium, bordered below by a narrow dark eyestripe and above by a dark lateral crown-stripe. The dark and rather narrow malar stripe was well marked but the dark moustachial stripe was more diffuse. The crown and upperparts were plain greyish brown. Legs were pale yellow pinkish and noticeably long, with the tibia distinctly longer than the bill, which was long and heavy, with largely yellowish-orange mandible and dark culmen and tip. Pale outer tail feathers were also noticed, although whether they were buff or white could not be decided. The birds often adopted a very upright posture. Some calls, transcribed as a thin, high-pitched *psiiit* or *tsee-ip* were briefly heard on take-off.

Based on this description and the most recent literature (Borrow & Demey 2001), we became confident that the birds were Long-legged Pipits, although our observation was well outside the species' known range (Borrow & Demey 2001). Subsequently, we sent our photographs to R. Demey and R. J. Dowsett, who confirmed our identification.

## Discussion

Long-legged Pipit is a common or locally common resident from northern Angola to Congo, Gabon and south-west Cameroon (Borrow & Demey 2001, Sinclair & Ryan 2003). In 2000 it was also reported further north on the coast opposite Bioko at Bakote (Languy *et al.* 2005) and more recently (2004) has been recorded further inland in the Korup area, both in far western Cameroon, close to the border with Nigeria (Bobo *et al.* 2005). Possible occurrence has been suggested in south-east Nigeria (Borrow & Demey 2001) and Tyler (2004) reports two unconfirmed sightings there, which remain unassessed (S. J. Tyler pers. comm.). According to Tyler (2004), Long-legged Pipit is extending its range, possibly as a result of deforestation. In 2006, a significant north-east range extension was also reported from Congo-Brazzaville, with confirmation that the species is the common savannah pipit at Lac Télé

Community Reserve (H. Rainey in *Bull. ABC* 14: 98, 2007).

Our observations appear to be the first confirmed records of Long-legged Pipit for Nigeria and Benin, and are respectively *c.* 600 km and 790 km west of its previously known range. Although vagrancy or a paucity of knowledge of its status due to a lack of ornithological coverage in these two countries cannot be excluded, our records build on the assumption of Borrow & Demey (2001) that *A. pallidirostris* is extending its range west. Observers in this part of Africa should clearly be on the lookout for the species in open habitats.

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